SPORT

Australian Open title rivals ease through in Brisbane

BRISBANE: Australian Open title rivals Aryna Sabalenka, Madison Keys and Elena Rybakina all launched their build-up with straight-sets wins Tuesday in Brisbane but home favourite Nick Kyrgios lost on his return.

Sabalenka, the world number one beaten in last year's Melbourne final by Keys, took just 48 minutes to dispose of Cristina Bucsa 6-0, 6-1 in the second round of the season-opening tournament.

Sabalenka said the fact that she played so well in her first match of the campaign showed that her divisive December 28 "Battle of the Sexes" exhibition match in Dubai against Kyrgios had been worthwhile.

"When you play against a guy the intensity is completely different," said the Belarusian. "Especially when there is Nick, who is drop-shotting every other shot, so you move a lot, so there was a great fitness for me. And today I was, like, whew, let's move around, you know."

Sabalenka will now play Sorana Cirstea in the third round and remains on track to meet Keys in the quarter-finals, a rematch of last year's Australian Open final.

Keys reached the Brisbane third round with a 6-4, 6-3 win over fellow American McCartney Kessler.

Like Sabalenka, Keys had a bye into the second round and said she had found it tough to find her rhythm early on.

"I think it's sometimes a little bit harder when the person you're playing has already played a match, and then you're kind of trying to still knock off a bit of the rust," she said. "I felt like it took a little bit just to find my rhythm, but I feel like once I did it, I kind of settled in a little bit better."

Former Wimbledon champion and third seed Rybakina moved through with a 6-3, 7-5 win over Chinese qualifier Zhang Shuai.

The injury-plagued Kyrgios had a short spell on court in his first singles match since March, the Australian losing 6-3, 6-4 to American Aleksandar Kovacevic in 65 minutes.

The 30-year-old is hoping for a wildcard at Melbourne Park and will try to build his match fitness when he teams up with Thanasi Kokkinakis for a doubles round of 16 match on Wednesday.

The duo won their match against Matthew Ebden and Rajeev Ram on Sunday and will take on Sadio Doumbia and Fabien Reboul next.

Despite doubts about his future in the sport, Kyrgios said that Tuesday's match was part of the rebuilding process after a series of wrist and knee injuries derailed his career following his run to the 2022 Wimbledon final.

"This is a stepping stone," Kyrgios added. "I actually just spoke to Daniil Medvedev in the locker room, and he's like, 'look, you play one match every now and then, it's not going to be the way you want it all the time'.

"As long as I feel good and I'm going to be able to try and use it as a building block, that's my goal obviously, and not just Australian Open but this year, for whatever this year holds, I do want to continue to play as much as I can."—Agencies

AGADIR: Egypt's Mohamed Salah scores during the Africa Cup of Nations round-of-16 match against Benin at the Adrar Stadium.—Reuters

Salah seals Egypt win as Osimhen leads Nigeria into AFCON quarter-finals

RABAT: Mohamed Salah sealed an extra-time win for Egypt against Benin on Monday to take the Pharaohs through to the quarter-finals of the Africa Cup of Nations, before Victor Osimhen netted twice as Nigeria cruised to an emphatic victory in their last-16 clash with Mozambique.

Captain Salah scored after 124 minutes to clinch a 3-1 extra-time triumph for the Egyptians over plucky minnows Benin in a thrilling last-16 encounter in Agadir.

Egypt's tally of seven AFCON titles is more than any other country but the last of those victories came in 2010 and Liverpool superstar Salah has never picked up a winner's medal in the competition.

Salah said his team was not among the favorites to win the title, but insisted they would give their best to go deeper in the tournament.

"I don't think we are a favourite at all [to win the title]" Salah told reporters. "We have young players, and most of them play in Egypt. We just fight for our country... but everybody gives their best and you could see today."

The 33-year-old said there were no easy games in AFCON. "The level is quite similar, I told the team yesterday that no side loses by four or five goals. [Benin] have a good team and a good coach... I'm glad we managed to win in the end".

Marwan Attia put the Pharaohs ahead on 69 minutes, sidefooting superbly into the roof of the net from just outside the box after being set up by Mohamed Hany.

Benin lie 57 places below Egypt in the world rankings but they forced extra time by equalising in the 83rd minute when Jodel Dossou scored from close range after goalkeeper Mohamed El Shenawy had done superbly to palm a Mohamed Tijani cross away from his line.

FES: Nigeria's Victor Osimhen (L) celebrates after scoring during the Africa Cup of Nations round-of-16 match against Mozambique at the Sports Complex Stadium.—AFP

To extra time they went, with Egypt looking to avoid a repeat of 2024 when they were eliminated in the last 16 on penalties by the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Yasser Ibrahim headed Egypt back in front seven minutes into the extra period, before Salah ended any doubt about the outcome on the breakaway right at the end with his third goal at the tournament; producing a typically composed finish as he beat the back-pedalling keeper from 25 metres.

Egypt will now stay in Agadir to face title-holders Ivory Coast or Burkina Faso on Saturday in the quarter-finals.

"Before the game, I said there are no easy teams, and Benin were tough opponents. Egypt are a great team and I want to make my people happy," said Pharaohs coach Hossam Hassan.

Osimhen grabbed a brace and Ademola Lookman played a part in all the goals as Nigeria comprehensively beat Mozambique 4-0 on a rainy night in Fes.

Atalanta forward Lookman, a former winner of the African footballer of the year award like Osimhen, opened the scoring after 20 minutes from an Akor Adams assist.

Osimhen had started the game without wearing his trademark mask but restored the face covering before netting Nigeria's second goal on 25 minutes after a Lookman cross from the left was helped on by Adams.

The Galatasaray forward then scored again from another Lookman delivery just after half-time, his third goal in three games after seven Cup of Nations appearances without finding the net.

Lookman was again the provider as Sevilla forward Adams rifled in the fourth quarter of an hour from the end, as the Super Eagles recorded the biggest win in an AFCON knockout tie since Egypt hammered Algeria 4-0 in the semi-finals at the 2010 tournament in Angola.

"I am very happy. It was a good performance from the team, scoring four goals. There is lots to be happy with. Hopefully we can keep up the good work," said Lookman, named man of the match.

Mozambique go home but this Cup of Nations can go down as a success for them after they reached the knockout phase for the very first time.

Determined to make up for their failure to qualify for the World Cup, Nigeria march on to a last-eight tie on Saturday in Marrakesh against either Algeria or DR Congo. —Agencies

Guthrie leads Dakar after stage three sweep for Ford

RIYADH: Ford Raptors filled the top five places in the Dakar Rally as American Mitch Guthrie Jr won the third 421km stage in Saudi Arabia, his first victory in the top car category, and took the overall lead on Tuesday.

Guthrie ended the loop starting and finishing in Al Ula with a 26 second overall lead over Czech driver Martin Prokop with Sweden's Mattias Ekstrom third.

"We started at the back and [co-driver] Kellon [Walch] killed it with the navigation," said Guthrie. "There were a lot of tricky spots, but we had no flat tyres. The car was great so we just kept moving all day, really."

Spaniard Carlos Sainz, a four-times Dakar winner still competing at 63, was in fourth place overall and compatriot Nani Roma fifth.

Brazilian Lucas Moraes was sixth with Dacia Sandrider teammates Cristina Gutierrez, Nasser Al-Attiyah and Sebastien Loeb seventh, 10th and 12th respectively.

Five-times winner Al-Attiyah had led the standings after Monday's stage but dropped to 11 minutes and 39 seconds off the pace.

Al-Attiyah, who suffered two punctures, was the only driver of Monday's leading six to remain in the top 10. Toyota had filled the top five places in Monday's stage.

Nine-times world rally champion Loeb also lost time with two punctures in the first 100km and no further spare tyre after that.

"We're driving at about 20% of our capacity just to avoid punctures and we still get them," said the Frenchman. "You don't see the punctures coming and with two flat tyres and 300 km to go, I had no spare wheels left so we drove the rest of the stage at crawling pace. I'm just happy to be at the finish because at one point I really didn't think we were going to make it".

In the motorcycle category, Spain's Tosha Schareina won the stage for Honda with Australia's defending champion Daniel Sanders retaining the overall lead on a KTM, one minute and seven seconds ahead of Honda's Ricky Brabec.

Wednesday's fourth stage is 417km from Al Ula with an overnight bivouac in the desert. —Reuters

SOUTH African rider Bradley Cox competes during the third stage of the Dakar Rally on Tuesday.—AFP

Chelsea chase stability with Rosenior as owners lay out new blueprint

LONDON: Chelsea have tried almost everything since BlueCo swept in with promises of modernisation in 2022, with heavy spending, long contracts and youth-heavy squads, but what has remained elusive is the one thing the club once took for granted — stability.

That is something they have set out to change with the appointment of Liam Rosenior on Tuesday as the Englishman becomes Chelsea's fourth permanent head coach under the current ownership.

By offering the 41-year-old a contract until 2032 after parachuting him in from their sister club Racing Strasbourg, BlueCo are signalling not just another managerial change but an attempt to lock in a long-term identity.

Since the takeover, illustrious names like Thomas Tuchel, Graham Potter, Mauricio Pochettino and Enzo Maresca have all departed — all casualties of an ownership group that professed patience while repeatedly resorting to upheaval.

Knee-jerk decisions were often associated with Roman Abramovich's Chelsea, yet the frequency of change has been mirrored by his successors.

Rosenior's appeal thereby lies in his suitability to the "player development" model BlueCo insist they are building.

At Strasbourg, he coaxed progress from one of the youngest squads in Europe, guiding them to European qualification in his debut season.

Chelsea interim manager Calum McFarlane, the club's Under-21 coach who stepped in after Enzo Maresca parted ways with the club on New Year's Day and would remain in charge for Wednesday's Premier League match against Fulham, expects to have a close working relationship with Rosenior.

"I am sure it will be a really good connection," McFarlane, who will return to his day job coaching in the academy at the Chelsea's Cobham Training Centre, told reporters on Tuesday.

"Cobham is part of this club and part of the history of this club. It is something the club is proud of. It is in the DNA. I know it is something the sporting directors are proud of and it is part of our job to make Liam's job difficult in terms of bringing more players into the first team."

Rosenior's arrival is also less about star power than familiarity — the product of an ecosystem heavily influenced by Brighton & Hove Albion, the club Chelsea's hierarchy increasingly appear eager to emulate.

Brighton's rise as they punched above their financial weight was founded on clarity.

Under chairman Tony Bloom, they built a tightly integrated sporting department where recruitment, data analytics and coaching worked towards a shared identity.

Managers were selected to fit the system and not define it, allowing the club to absorb departures without losing direction. Patience, not panic, became the defining principle at the south-coast club.

While uprooting Graham Potter from Brighton was a failed experiment, BlueCo's pursuit of Rosenior echoes that philosophy as he also knows the Brighton way, having played there, coached the youth team and worked with key figures now embedded at Chelsea.

Paul Winstanley, Chelsea's co-sporting director, previously collaborated with Rosenior at Brighton and was instrumental in placing him at Strasbourg.

Sam Jewell, Brighton's former head of scouting, has also been drawn into Chelsea's orbit, while the squad includes key ex-Brighton players like Moises Caicedo, Marc Cucurella, Robert Sanchez and Joao Pedro.

The question is whether an inexperienced manager like Rosenior can survive Stamford Bridge's pressure cooker.

Rosenior is untested as a coach in England's top flight, having had a spell as interim manager at Derby County and then as head coach at Hull City, both in the Championship, before taking over at Strasbourg.

While Brighton's model thrives in an environment where expectations are managed and progress is incremental, Chelsea have shown they are anything but.

Supporters have already grown weary of being told to trust a process that keeps resetting itself while Strasbourg fans have protested their club's perceived role as a feeder in a broader ownership strategy.

"This is a club with a unique spirit and a proud history of winning trophies. My job is to protect that identity and create a team that reflects these values in every game we play as we continue winning trophies," Rosenior, who will be the second-youngest coach currently in charge of a Premier League club after Brighton's 32-year-old Fabian Hurzeler, said.

For Chelsea, the challenge will be allowing him the time to bring order to the chaos as BlueCo show not just ambition but also restraint while their new blueprint stands up to the glare of elite expectation.—Reuters

Mahin clinches title

ISLAMABAD: Mahin Aftab Qureshi bagged the ladies' singles title of the National Ranking Tennis Championships here at the PTF Tennis Complex on Tuesday, beating Soha Ali 6-1, 6-1.

Ahmad Nael Qureshi and Abubakar Talha took the men's doubles title, triumphing over Barkatullah and Yousaf Khalil 6-3, 6-4.

Meanwhile, veteran Aqeel Khan set up a men's singles final clash with Muzammil Murtaza as they beat Mohammad Shoaib (6-4, 6-0) and Yousaf (6-1, 7-6 (9)) respectively.

In the girls' 14&under final, Aimen Rehan beat Khadija Khalil 6-7(6), 6-0, 6-2.—APP

'Demon' drags hosts Australia into United Cup quarters

SYDNEY: World number six Alex de Minaur beat up-and-coming Jakub Mensik and then won in doubles to drag hosts Australia into the quarter-finals of the United Cup on Tuesday and thrill an energised Sydney crowd.

Also progressing into the last eight of the season-opening 18-team ATP-WTA event were Belgium and the Czech Republic, but Italy bowed out.

Hopes are high at home that De Minaur, fondly known as "Demon", can go deep at the Australian Open starting this month and he served warning with a 6-4, 6-1 win over the 18th-ranked Mensik.

That drew Australia level in the tie against the Czech Republic and De Minaur then paired up with Storm Hunter as they won the mixed doubles rubber in straight sets to progress.

The Czechs went through despite the 2-1 loss.

"I didn't start the year the way I wanted to," said De Minaur, who fell to Casper Ruud in his first group match.

"But something I've done really well in my career is bouncing back, so I'm happy I bounced back today."

In Perth, world number three Jasmine Paolini defeated France's Leolia Jeanjean 6-2, 6-3 for an opening win of the season, finally sealing the deal on her sixth match point.

But it was not enough as Italy joined France in exiting the competition.

Paolini, a two-time Grand Slam finalist, said: "First matches are always tricky.

"I'm happy how I felt on court today. We could not win the group this year but we did our best and fought to the last ball."

Wednesday's ties include quarter-finals between holders the United States and Greece, and Switzerland and Argentina, both in Perth. —AFP

PERTH: Italy's Flavio Cobolli serves to France's Arthur Rinderknech during their United Cup match on Tuesday.—AFP